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THE CHURCH TO BE PERFECTED,

A SERMON,

Preached at the Ordination of

REV. ANDREW BIGELOW,

IN SOUTH DARTMOUTH,

AUGUST 25, 1841,

BY REV. ASAHEL BIGELOW,

Pastor of the Orthodox Congregational Church in Walpole, Mass.

NEW-BEDFORD:

PRESS OF BENJAMIN LINDSEY.

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At a meeting of the First Congregational Church in Dartmouth,
August 25th, 1841 —

Resolved, That the thanks of this Church be returned to the Rev. ASAHEL BIGELOW for his very able and appropriate Sermon, delivered at the ordination of the Rev. ANDREW BIGELOW in that place, and that a copy be requested for publication — Upon motion,

Resolved, That T. Thomas and I. C. Thacher, be a Committee to communicate this Resolution to the Rev. ASAHEL BIGELOW.

Rev. ASAHEL BIGELOW,

Dear Sir — We take pleasure in communicating the enclosed Resolution, and to express our desire that you will comply with the request of the Church — hoping that when published it will be beneficial and useful to the community at large.

Very Respectfully, your obedient servants,

THACHER THOMAS, }
ISAIAH C. THACHER } *Committee.*

South Dartmouth, August 25th, 1841.

Messrs. THOMAS AND THACHER,

Dear Brethren — Your official communication, embodying a Resolution of the Church in this place, and requesting a copy of a Sermon, preached at the Ordination of my brother, was received last evening.

The Sermon was not designed for the press, but if, in your estimation it will be beneficial to yourselves or others in advancing the great interest of the Church, I cannot refuse a compliance with your request; a copy therefore, will be committed to your disposal.

Yours Respectfully,

ASAHEL BIGELOW.

Dartmouth, Aug. 26th, 1841.

S E R M O N .

EPHESIANS iv: 13.

“Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”

THE present life is a state of imperfection. Scarcely any thing in human affairs has reached a point beyond which there can be no improvement. Inventions and discoveries are almost daily made in the arts and sciences. The principles of government and their various applications, are undergoing important changes. Intercourse among the nations, and between different parts of the same nation, is rapidly increasing. Civilization is on the advance ; and the world is expecting a brighter, happier period than it has ever enjoyed. And there is something with respect to divine institutions corresponding with this progress in human affairs. The former dispensation, compared with the gospel, was quite imperfect. “For even that which was made glorious had no glory in this respect, by reason of the glory that excelleth.” Nor is all perfection even under the gospel. They who enjoy its richest blessings and are most fully under its enlightening, redeeming influences, are looking forward to a better state. “For the

earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God." Christians individually have not attained, and the church as a body is not already perfect. For the Apostle speaks in the name of the Church, "Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." This implies that the Church is yet to be perfected. Accordingly your attention is invited to some particulars in which, and to the means by which, the Church is yet to be perfected.

With respect to religious knowledge the Church is yet to be perfected. She comes far short of a thorough understanding of the gospel in all its truths, bearings, and relations, and is yet to make important advances in the knowledge of spiritual things. This is implied in the text. Till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man. The knowledge of the Son of God, or of Christ, is knowledge of what he revealed respecting his own character, office, and work as Saviour; the character, government, and will of God; the character and duty of man; the immortality of the soul and eternal retribution; in short, all the truths connected with the gospel. The knowledge which christians have of these truths is in no case perfect during the present life. Every one, at all acquainted with himself, is sensible of this. The more one studies and understands the gospel, the more conscious is he of ignorance respecting it. For, every time he comes to the investigation of it, new truths, or new views of the same truths, present themselves, so that he is led more and more to admire the depth of its riches and wisdom. And if there are those who imagine their knowledge of the gospel complete, it is they whose religious information is quite

limited. They are like one who, viewing a landscape at a distance, thinks he has a perfect perception of it. But let him approach, enter upon, and attempt to survey it, and he is soon convinced that his first impressions were very incomplete. And if they, who imagine their religious knowledge perfect, should commence a thorough investigation of the gospel, they would soon find themselves in a field of which they could see no limits; and would be disposed to say with the chief of the Apostles, "Now we see through a glass darkly," "Now we know in part." But the time shall come when christians shall see face to face, and know even as they are known. They shall grow in grace and in the *knowledge of the Lord* till, with respect to knowledge, they shall be perfect men, possessing correct views of the gospel in all its parts and relations.

As a consequence of this perfection in knowledge christians will have completeness, unity, of faith. The reason why they are not now one in religious belief is, that their religious knowledge is imperfect. None have a full perception of the truths of the gospel in all their connexions, and bearings. But the knowledge of some is more complete than that of others. These different degrees of knowledge in different individuals, and this imperfection of knowledge in the case of all, are necessarily the occasion of more or less difference with respect to religious belief. But, when the knowledge of all shall be complete, they will alike see and believe the truths of the gospel; and, believing the same truths, they will have unity of faith. Objects, viewed by twilight, are seen indistinctly, and different individuals agree not respecting them. But, when the day has fully risen, all is made manifest and agreement follows of course. So, when, with respect to religious knowl-

edge, "that which is perfect is come," then this partial union of religious belief will be done away.

Another particular, in which the church is yet to be perfected, is holiness. That she has not yet attained, neither is already perfect, is obvious to others if not to herself. When contemplated as a body, she exhibits many imperfections. And if the members of which she is composed are examined individually, none are found without blemish. Let the thoughts, feelings, and actions of any one be impartially tried by the demands of either the law or the gospel, and he will be found wanting. And probably there are none acquainted with their own hearts, who cannot say, at least occasionally, "I see a law in my members warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin."

But the church will not always be thus imperfect. It will at length come unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. This is his purpose respecting it. For he "gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it; that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." To this perfect degree of holiness the church of Christ will ultimately arrive. "We know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."

At present the church is not complete as to its members. This is another particular in which it is yet to be perfected. When complete, the church will consist of individuals gathered from all the generations of men, which shall have lived from the beginning to the end of time. Some will be still alive when Christ shall come at the end of the world. "We shall not all sleep,

but we shall be changed.” “We which are alive, and remain unto the coming of our Lord, shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then, we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air.” This shows that christians will be living when Christ shall come at the close of time. Consequently, the church will not be complete, all its members will not be gathered in, till this period shall have arrived. Then it will be perfect. Then we *all* shall have come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man. Then the body, having received all its members, will be complete.

Thus it appears that the church is yet to be perfected in knowledge, holiness, and with respect to members. The process by which this perfection is to be attained is gradual. None, on becoming christians are at once made perfect. Nor, at any subsequent period, is their knowledge at once completed by special revelation made to them. Neither are any perfected in holiness by miraculous influence exerted upon them. But the attainment of both knowledge and holiness is progressive. “The path of the just is as the shining light which shineth more and more unto the perfect day.” Christians “grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord.” “They are to leave the principles of the doctrine of Christ, and go on unto perfection.” As one, during a course of years, grows up from infancy to manhood, so the church advances from lower to higher degrees of spiritual attainment. Each individual is making progress. All her members are in a course of transformation, and will become so fashioned and spirit-

ualized that, when the whole church shall come together in the future world, the body will be complete, harmonious, a glorious church.

The church will then be perfect in knowledge. Not that she will know at once all she *ever* will know. She will doubtless continue to increase in knowledge during eternity. But, on arriving at heaven, her knowledge of spiritual things will be complete, harmonious. She will not understand one part of the great scheme of redemption and be ignorant of another, but will have a comprehensive, correct view of all its parts, each being seen in its true light and regarded according to its real importance.

The church will continue to advance in holiness during eternity. Still, on arriving at heaven, she will be perfect in holiness in the sense that she will be free from sin. Some of her exercises will not be holy and others sinful, but all will be holy, so that her holiness, though limited in degree, will be complete. There will be no alloy, no mixture of sin, no spot, no blemish. Towards this point the church is gradually advancing; one member after another is coming in; each is growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord, and, ultimately, we shall all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man.

But by what means is this happy result to be attained? The truths of the gospel, received in faith and habitually contemplated, are the means by which the church is to be perfected. For the way in which one becomes complete in knowledge, is by studying and meditating upon the truth in its various parts and relations. In this way the plan of redemption becomes intelligible, and is seen to be appropriate. The way too, in which one becomes complete in holiness is, by obtaining adequate

views of the gospel, receiving it in faith, and yielding to its full influence. The gospel thus received and applied by the holy spirit, produces correct intellectual views and right feelings of heart, or becomes effectual to sanctification. Agreeably, it was the prayer of Christ, "Sanctify them through thy truth." Now the means, which make the individual member complete in knowledge and holiness, are those which render the whole body complete. And the means by which the church is to be perfected with respect to members are the same. They are the truths of the gospel made effectual by the Holy Spirit. All that have been connected with the church hitherto have been gathered to it in this way. They were convinced of sin and converted by the truth attended with divine influence. They were "begotten through the gospel."—"Saved by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost." These means will continue working effectually till the church, having received her members from the last generation of men that shall exist, shall be complete.

But, to accomplish this result, there must be instrumentality as well as means. This Christ has provided. "When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ; till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. This shows that Christ provided instrumentality expressly to effect the object we are contemplating—to bring the church to a state of perfection in point of knowledge, holiness and members. For he gave apostles, prophets, evangelists,

teachers, for the *perfecting of the saints*, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the *body of Christ*. And this instrumentality was designed to be permanent, to continue operating till the above object should be fully accomplished, till the church should be in all respects complete,—till we *all* come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man. To accomplish this object the above instrumentality is obviously necessary. In other words, the gospel ministry, thoroughly furnished by *grace* and by *education*, is necessary to perfect the church in the several particulars now considered.

It is necessary to perfect the church in religious knowledge. The fact, that Christ *instituted* it for this purpose is evidence of its necessity. For, had it been needless, he, being infinite in wisdom, would not have instituted it. But we are not dependent upon *inference*, or *faith* merely for evidence of its necessity. This necessity is so obvious that we can *see* it. That the gospel ministry should be furnished by *grace*, holiness, experimental knowledge of the truth, none can doubt. For, if the blind lead the blind, all foresee the result. And that, in order to perfect the church in knowledge, the gospel ministry must be furnished by education, is scarcely less plain. For christians, on becoming such, are infants in spiritual knowledge, and are exhorted “as new-born babes, to desire the sincere milk of the word, that they may grow thereby.” The word, the truth, the gospel, in all its parts and relations, its doctrines and precepts, must come before their mind if they would grow in knowledge till they arrive at the stature of men. Now it is true that, by reading, meditation, personal research, all can make desirable attainments. But that, without religious instruction, christians will not continue advancing in knowledge so as to make

those *high* attainments which they should make, is quite evident. Observation makes it plain. It is now seen, and has ever been seen, that individuals and churches, who avail not themselves of competent religious instruction, make but very little intellectual progress. They grow up to manhood with respect to age but remain children in knowledge.

But competent religious instruction cannot be imparted except by such as have first been thoroughly instructed. And here is a principle universally admitted in relation to all temporal pursuits. None can adequately teach the mechanic arts, agriculture, manufactures, literature, till they themselves have been taught. And is the knowledge of spiritual things — of things pertaining to the divine government, to eternity — things into which angels desire to look — so much more easily obtained that all may not only acquire it without effort, but adequately communicate it to others? God, in his dealings with man has never proceeded upon this principle. For, when he made this promise to his people, “I will take you one of a city and two of a family, and bring you to Zion,” he further promised — “I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.” And when he would “turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers,” he sent “Elijah the prophet” to do it. When Christ ascended up on high, he left a ministry miraculously furnished for the edification of the church. And Paul, in his instructions to Timothy, as a religious teacher, says, “Meditate upon these things: give thyself *wholly to them*, that thy profiting may appear to all.” From all this it is plain that the gospel ministry, in order to feed the church with knowledge, must itself be

furnished with knowledge: plain too, that God designed it should be thus furnished.

Besides, christians in general are very much on a level, as to their knowledge of the truths and doctrines of religion and of their various connexions, relations, bearings. One, therefore can receive little instruction from another. There may be mutual exhortation and encouragement given but little progress will be made in knowledge. If, therefore, instead of securing the services of a competent religious teacher, christians rely either upon one another or upon an illiterate ministry for instruction, they may pass continually round through a limited circle of truths, but will not go on unto perfection. And christians will not remain satisfied in these circumstances. For mind is progressive, expansive, and must have something to fill its growing capacities. Therefore, where they avail not themselves of an educated ministry, their interest in public religious services soon declines. No "scribe instructed unto the kingdom brings forth out of his treasure things *new*," for the want thereof the mind turns to the world for something to fill its "aching void," and christians are at best *stationary* in their course.

But this is not all. Without adequate religious instruction, christians are wanting in stability. They have not sufficient confidence in their religious belief, but are easily drawn away by what is *new* or *marvellous*, "ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." Now apostles speak of "continuing in the faith grounded and settled," and pray for christians that "God would make them perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle them." It was for this, in fact, that Christ instituted the Gospel ministry. He gave apostles pastors, teachers, "for the work of the ministry, for

the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man. That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive." It is obvious that, in establishing a thoroughly furnished ministry to prevent these evils, Christ wisely consulted the wants of the church. For christians, well instructed in the doctrines of the gospel, are comparatively immoveable. They have confidence in their belief, are conscious of having an intelligible, sure foundation, and can "give a reason of the hope that is in them." They can distinguish between truth and error, reality and delusion, and therefore remain firm in times of trial, when others are "like waves of the sea, driven with the winds and tossed." Besides, the church needs the *defence* of a thoroughly furnished ministry. For *depraved*, educated mind is arrayed against her, aiming at her destruction, and must be met by mind *sanctified*, educated, having clear intellectual perceptions of truth, and knowing experimentally its appropriateness and power.

The gospel ministry, thoroughly furnished by grace and by education, is necessary to perfect the church in holiness. For she is to be sanctified through the truth : — the truths of the gospel made effectual by the Holy Spirit. Agreeably, christians are said to "have purified their souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit." But, if the church is to be perfected in holiness by means of the truth, then must she come to the knowledge of the truth. The doctrines of the gospel must be presented to her mind in their fulness, at proper seasons, in just order, in suitable degrees, and in a clear light, so that, truth shall be made to act upon the mind

and heart appropriately.—The *whole system* of revealed truth—not merely some parts of it—for it is all designed to aid in and is essential to the perfecting of the saints. They are to “grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord,” and cannot make progress in the one and not in the other. The end, which is holiness, cannot be attained without the means, which are knowledge, truth. It is only when the *whole field* of revealed truth is laid open to the view of christians that they have just perceptions of what is required of them, and of the motives which excite to holy obedience. It is under the influence of these *adequate*, vivid impressions of the gospel, that they go on unto perfection. It is while “with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, that they are changed into the same image from glory to glory.”

But who that is not thoroughly furnished for the work, is able to make such exhibitions of the truth? Who, that doth not both know the truth experimentally and make the study of it his chief employ? Even Paul, with his fervent spirit, his accomplished education, and his miraculous gifts, exclaims, in view of the responsible, arduous undertaking, “Who is sufficient for these things.”

The gospel ministry, thoroughly furnished, is also necessary to perfect the church with respect to members. For the church is to be composed of individuals gathered from all the generations of men that have lived and shall live, and the instrumentality, employed in advancing it to its present state, is that which shall be employed in gathering in its remaining members. None other has been provided; nor will any other be provided. For, when Christ commissioned his apostles to go and preach the gospel to every creature, he instituted a ministry which he designed should continue

till redemption should be complete. Accordingly, he said to them, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." This assurance implies that Christ intended his apostles should have successors in the ministry, qualified for their work, with whom he would be, and by whose instrumentality he would gather in his people from age to age till the close of time. This succession in the ministry he has furnished and continued up to the present period. It is the chief human agency by which he has been gathering and edifying the church : and he will continue it till the church shall be complete, till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

From what has now been said it follows that, in sustaining a pious, educated ministry, the church exercises wisdom. For she is yet imperfect and needs to advance in spiritual attainments. This is essential to her enjoyment, her usefulness, her complete preparation for heaven. For, unless she make all the progress in knowledge and holiness of which she is capable, she can neither enjoy all which it is her privilege to enjoy, nor exert in favor of the world's salvation all the influence it is her duty to exert ; nor can she enter into the kingdom of God under as favorable circumstances as she might. For, in his kingdom there will be degrees of glory corresponding with present holiness and usefulness. "For one star differeth from another star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead." "They that turn many to righteousness shall shine as the stars for ever and ever." But the ministry thoroughly furnished, is a principal means by which the church is to be advanced in spiritual attainments. It was instituted for this purpose ; and the condition of those christians

who enjoy it, compared with that of others, shows its importance. For their progress is actually greater. They have ascended higher in the path which shineth more and more; have more enlarged views; more extended prospects; a more stable, consistent piety; a more intelligible, satisfactory ground of hope. All their circumstances, temporal and spiritual, show that the maintenance of an adequate ministry is not vain.

But all the benefits resulting from the ministry are not, at present, realized. For this is the instrumentality by which the church is to be sustained and piety transmitted from generation to generation, so that instead of the fathers shall be their children through all coming ages till the church, having received all her members, shall be complete. Therefore it is not fruitless to sustain a thoroughly furnished ministry. I know there are those who assert the contrary.—Those who decry the ministry as a departure from christian simplicity, an invention of man, a combination for selfish purposes, an engine of oppression, an obstacle to reform, a hindrance to the advancement of Christ's kingdom. But this is nothing new. It is only a repetition of what has been. As, in the natural world, there are bodies which periodically appear, blaze a while, and pass away; so, from the commencement of christianity, there have been associated errorists, bodies, which, moving in quite eccentric orbits, have periodically appeared in the moral heavens, aiming, by their own excess of brightness, to eclipse and cast into perpetual shade that steady light which, through every age has been shedding upon the world its benign radiance. And they have had influence:—have attracted notice. The multitude has gone out to gaze. But while they were in the attitude of expectation, anticipating marvellous light, these self-illuminated bodies, more like meteors than like comets,

have passed away, leaving them in darkness more gross and disastrous than before. And now, in their disappointment and gloom, they have turned to the permanent institutions of Christ, to the organized church sustaining a pious, educated ministry;—to this divinely constituted and divinely *styled* “light of the world” they have turned, convinced that, under God, it is the only sufficient medium of intelligence and salvation for lost, benighted man.

Experience has shown that to sustain the ministry of reconciliation is not vain. And experience will yet show it;—the experience of coming generations;—the united, joyful experience of “the general assembly and church of the first born” complete in glory;—they, sitting upon the heavenly hills and reviewing all the way in which they were led through the scenes of time, will remember with delight, and everlasting gratitude, that it pleased God “by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believed.”

It follows from this discourse that to be a minister of the gospel is a privilege and an honor. Not that it secures either worldly treasure, distinction or applause; nor because it is a post of ease. On the contrary, the faithful minister of Christ must endure self-denial, bear the world’s neglect, submit to trials and discouragements, and labor on till worn out with care and service. Still he enjoys a high privilege; for he is producing effects happy and lasting. He is employed in perfecting the church of Christ; and as he sees it advancing in knowledge, holiness, joy, and increasing by the addition of such as shall be saved; as he sees member after member brought to maturity and gathered to their rest as shocks of corn in their season, and, in thought, follows them along the ages of a blessed immor-

tality—as he contemplates these happy, enduring effects of his labors, he enjoys a satisfaction unknown to the world and would not exchange conditions with the most distinguished of earth's favorites.

Nor is the ministry of reconciliation merely a privilege. It is an honor. The faithful minister is a “worker together” with Christ and God: and, to be associated with God in accomplishing any of his works of benevolence, however small, is an honor. But the gospel ministry is an instrumentality which God is employing for the accomplishment of his noblest work. By it he is edifying and will perfect the church; is carrying forward and will complete the work of redemption. This is a work of unrivalled importance and grandeur; for it deeply involves the glory of God. It occupied his mind from eternity, and is the great object in subserviency to which, the world was made, and to which all the distinguished events of time have referred. It is the object for which “God was manifest in the flesh,” the cross endured, angels sent forth as ministering spirits.—The object for which “all nature stands, and stars their courses move.” In short, it is Jehovah's greatest work, that upon which he relies for the fullest, most illustrious display of his glory. “To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the *church* the manifold wisdom of God.” The church, “delivered from the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of his dear son,” will be an object of unrivalled interest, and will stand eternally as a monument illustrating the “exceeding greatness of his power, and the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness towards us through Christ Jesus.” And when this great work, this spiritual building, shall have been perfected; when the top stone shall have been laid with shouting, and it

stands complete, the admiration of the universe, will it be no honor to have been instrumental in fitting and polishing even *one* of the lively stones of which it will be composed?

My Dear Brother, yours are the privilege and the honor of bearing a part in the accomplishment of this glorious work : — a privilege, an honor, to which angels aspire. And if, amidst the arduous labors before you, and the scenes of trial and discouragement through which you will be called to pass, you should be inclined to despondency, let the thought, that you are a worker together with God in accomplishing the object nearest his heart; an object, which is, and ultimately will *appear to be*, the greatest, most benevolent, glorious, that ever occupied even the divine mind; — let this thought sustain, cheer, animate you. Consider “that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.” Think of “the recompense of the reward.” And may such be your fidelity and success that this reward shall be great; — such that you shall at length “shine as the brightness of the firmament, and as the stars for ever and ever.”

